

**A Branded Artwork:
The Case of the Salvator Mundi**



Picture 1. Leonardo da Vinci's Salvator Mundi (circa 1500)
Courtesy of Christie's Images LTD 2017

Keywords: Da Vinci, Salvator Mundi, branding, commodification, value

Introduction

The painting *Salvator Mundi*, attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci, was auctioned by Christie's in 2017 and sold for 450.300.000\$ to an anonymous buyer, breaking the world record for the most expensive painting ever sold (Davis, 2017). However, when we look at the fame of the *Mona Lisa*, it does not come as a surprise that it is a Leonardo to open the ground for this new era in the art market.

Copious articles (Davis, 2017; Gammon, 2017) investigate the reasons behind this inflated price, adducing the motives, among others, of provenance, mystery, exiguity of Da Vinci's paintings, and even the election of Donald Trump. To complement these various accounts, this paper explores the role of branding and post-modern commodification in the creation of the value of the aforementioned work. In particular, to provide a justification to this post factum branding, it connects the 'case of the *Salvator Mundi*' to the themes discussed by Hughes in the documentary *The Mona Lisa Curse* (2008).

In other words, the essay uses the case study of the *Salvator Mundi* to attempt to answer the question of 'what creates the value of an artwork in our contemporary society'. In this regard, the case of the *Salvator Mundi* is particularly interesting. Not only is it, up to this date, the most expensive painting ever sold, but it successfully entered and prevailed in a market of contemporary artworks. Keeping this in mind, the question can be reworked into 'what is the reason for which a Renaissance painting fits so well among 'Warhols'?'.

To answer the question, the essay adopts the theoretical framework provided by Tomiuc (2015) in her dissertation on *Branding in the Artworld*, which, in turn, adopts the concept introduced by Danto and renewed by Becker of the 'art worlds'. In later paragraphs, the paper draws concepts from the *Mona Lisa Curse* (2008), the *Van Gogh Effect* (Heinich, 1996), and finally from the Cultural Diamond and Olav Velthuis' view of the market (2005).

The structure of the paper is comprised of three sections, each of them responding to an element of the thesis of the essay - that the branding of Da Vinci's paintings is at the basis of its inflated price. The first part responds to the question of 'why Da Vinci and the *Salvator Mundi* in particular are suitable to be branded and commodified', the second one investigates 'why the painting is to be considered as branded and commodified' and the last part provides some ideas into 'why nowadays society values branding in art'.

Author, Painting and Provenance

The section that follows provides some background information on Da Vinci, the Salvator Mundi and the painting's pilgrimages among the centuries, with the aim to clarify the reasons for which this artwork is the perfect candidate to be 'branded'.

Leonardo Da Vinci was a Renaissance painter, inventor, scientist - etc. - from Vinci, Italy. He lived across the 15th and 16th century, in the period in which the concept of male artistic genius was being shaped by Vasari in his *Vite*. He magnificently embodied the figure of the genius, achieving excellence in many and varied areas. It is also because of his obsession with excellence and perfection that Da Vinci only completed around 20 paintings in his life. The figure of Leonardo, because of his geniality and his versatility, lends itself easily to be 'a screen for the more febrile, occult, conspiracy-obsessed side of the



Picture 2. Photo of Leonardo da Vinci's Salvator Mundi before restoration. Image courtesy Christie's.

contemporary imagination' (Davis, 2017). Further, his persona is retroactively interpretable according to Heinrich's Van Gogh effect: His 'personalization of artistic greatness' (Heinrich, 1996) comes before his paintings and the fame of his intimate life precedes that of his works.

Regarding the painting specifically, it had long been known that Leonardo had painted an illustrious Salvator Mundi towards the end of his career. However, til 2011, the only evidences of its existence were some documents and the presence of numerous copies of the painting in circulation. This paper takes in examination the version of The Salvator Mundi that resurfaced in 2011 after the restoration of Picture 2 and is the one currently identified as the original Da Vinci. Even though this paper will not go in detail into this point, it is worth pointing out that the matter of authentication of this artwork is still an open debate. The Salvator Mundi (Figure 1) has probably been painted between the 1490s and the 1500s and it represents a Christ 'savior of the world', with one hand pointing upwards and the other holding a sphere, representative of the world. The Christ is surrounded by an air of mystery and is, at the same time, also profoundly humane (Davis, 2017). This duplicity is achieved through the interrelation between the characteristically Leonardian 'sfumato' and the painter's meticulous attention to anatomical details.

Regarding the history of the painting, little is know with certainty about its residences and owners. After the painting left Leonardo's hands and, presumably, after a short stop at Louis XII of France's court, the Salvator Mundi was annexed to the collection of Charles I of England. Between the date it left his possession and 1763, it exchanged hands multiple

times and eventually was painted over into the version of Picture 2. Any trace of the painting faded until 1900, when it reappeared in the hands of the British collector Francis Cook. The painting was then sold at Sotheby's in 1958 by his grandson for only £45 to Kuntz Private Collection USA, and attributed to Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio - a pupil of Da Vinci. It was recently discovered (Carrigan, 2018) that the, previously unknown, Kuntz collector was Basil Clovis Hendry Sr, a sheet-metal company owner in Louisiana. The piece was sold by his family only in 2005 in New Orleans for around \$10,000.

The buyer was the New York dealer Robert Simon, who, for the first time in centuries, believed in the possibility that the painting were more valuable than it looked. He entrusted



Dianne Dwyer Modestini, a New York curator, to restore the painting. Thereafter, it was exhibited as a Leonardo in 2011 at the National Gallery in London. The last certain movement of the painting dates back to the auction by Christie's in November 2017, where it was sold for \$450m to an anonymous buyer. Currently, it is commonly believed that the painting has been purchased by Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and it was supposed to be exhibited at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which, nevertheless, delayed the display to the public until further notice (Ruiz, 2019).

In conclusion, the painting at hand contains in itself and in its provenance plenty of mysteries and wonders, which make it - together with its, albeit shallow, resemblance to the Mona Lisa - an optimal candidate for commodification and branding.

Picture 3. The condition of the painting before the restoration by Dianne Modestini. Photograph: Courtesy Dianne Modestini / © 2011 Salvator Mundi LLC

Branding and Commodification

The section that follows discusses directly the issue of branding and commodification of contemporary art. To do so, it first defines the two concepts above and then introduces Tomiuc's account of the contemporary 'celebrity persona' and the new way of conceptualizing art. Layed out this basis, it endeavors to demonstrate that this process is happening, exceptionally, also for Da Vinci and his paintings.



Picture 4. Funny edit of the Salvator Mundi, from the article 'La vendita record del Salvator Mundi di Leonardo scatena il web. Ecco le immagini più divertenti'

The terms *branding* and *commodification* became dominant in the art-related vocabulary with postmodernism. The first of the two refers to the ensemble of strategies and actions that constitute the differentiation of a product thanks to the creation of distinctive signs - such as a name or logo. Commodification, on the other hand, refers to the transformation of goods into commodities, that are any object of economic value.

Using these terms, Tomiuc (2015) analyzes the progressive transformation of the artist into a marketman and showman. She holds that the product of such a "celebrity persona" - as she refers to it - is an

object that is branded - in the sense that it is easily ascribable to the author, turned into a sort of logo of itself - and is commodified - as it is made with the main purpose of being sold. In this way, the artists become the products of the market in themselves, and this 'personal mythology' becomes the product of a thought out plan to appeal to the interest of mass-media and the public.

Although from her article it is clear how artists like Koons or Hirst adhere to the new paradigm of branded art, Da Vinci definitely does not seem to have painted the Salvator Mundi to gain likes on Instagram. So it is important to still address why this paper considers the Salvator Mundi a contemporary branded artwork. The answer to this question is suggested in the *Mona Lisa Curse* (2008) by the art critic Robert Hughes. In this contemporary landscape where 'art is at the service of the plutocrats', Hughes assimilates Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to Damien Hirst's, *For the Love of God*, explaining that:

“What ties the Mona Lisa to this glittery bobble is *their role in a giant shift in the art world*, that shift is all about money. It’s a story that I’ve watch unfold during the last 50 years. I’ve seen with growing disgust; the fetishization of art, the vast inflation of prices, and the effect of this on artists and museums. The entanglement of big money with art has become a curse on how art is made, controlled, and above all - *in the way that it’s experienced*. And this curse has affected the *entire art world*.” (The Mona Lisa Curse, 2008, my italics)

According to him, in fact, it was not only contemporary artists to be affected by this transformation, but it was the entire art world. In this case, the way in which art is experienced by society has turned the Mona Lisa into its own fac-similar, into the contemporary branded and commodified version of itself.

In addition, referring to the display in 1962 of the Mona Lisa at the MoMA, Hughes comments that:

“People came not to look at it, but to say that they’d seen it. (...) *The painting made the leap from artwork to icon of mass consumption*.” The postmodernist period of *art as commodity and mass spectacle* had begun.” (The Mona Lisa Curse, 2008, my italics)

It now becomes evident how Da Vinci was only retroactively reconstructed into a brand and, in a sense, how his most famous paintings (the Mona Lisa certainly, but the same will be shown for the Salvator Mundi) have lost their intrinsic value in the eyes of most of us, and now hold the value of an icon of mass consumption.

When the documentary was published, the Mona Lisa was the only outstanding example of this mutation, but I believe that this ‘curse’ has now expanded into a ‘Da Vinci curse’. In 2017, in fact, Christie’s leveraged on the already acquired fame of the Mona Lisa and the mysterious and catching subject and history of the painting (as discussed in the first paragraph) to extend the same transformation to the Salvator Mundi. The marketing campaign that Christie’s pulled out is brilliant: in the first place, the painting was referred to as ‘The Last Da Vinci’ - meaning either the last in private hands or the last painting chronologically - which is in both cases an exaggeration but it points the attention to the extraordinariness of the sale and, implicitly, also confers a sense of mystery. Following up on this title, the auction house also produced an emotionally moving commercial (link in the

references) featuring people staring at the painting with their eyes filled with awe. Among these people, also celebrities such as Leonardo Di Caprio and Patti Smith (Cusumano, 2017) are featured, which increases



Picture 5. Christie's unveils Andy Warhol's Sixty Last Suppers (pictured) at Christie's New York on October 10, 2017 in New York City. Photo by Ilya S. Savenok/Getty Images for Christie's Auction House.

the reach of the commercial. Christie's even created an Instagram feed dedicated to @thelastdavinci (Gammon, 2017). The last and most interesting marketing maneuver was that the Renaissance painting was sold in a contemporary art auction next to the Sixty Last Suppers by Andy Warhol (Picture 5)¹. Although the economic interest of such a move is clear - contemporary artworks are at present the most expensive in the market and therefore attract the wealthiest population -, the pairing of the two works also confers to the Salvator Mundi the same 'role' of the Warhol's: that of a commodity. It is ironic how this coupling of the Salvator Mundi with a Warhol so closely relates to the comparison of the Mona Lisa to Hirst's artwork made by Hughes.

¹ As a side note, the pairing of the two works was probably part of a double guarantee scheme by Dmitry Rybolovlev.

Value and Society

This last paragraph investigates the link between society and the creation of value, introducing Olav Velthuis' analysis and reflecting on how society is also at the basis of the change in art.

In his book *Talking Prices*, Velthuis explores the factors at the basis of the creation of price. In his view, 'markets are cultural constellations' (2005) which are based on a wide variety of cultural symbols, united through the communication between the agents. The product is what he calls a 'circuit of commerce' where the social ties are hierarchical. Which implies that, in a market, all the motives for the acquisition of a work of art are inevitably reconnectable to a desire to fit inside society, for example to acquire fame, a network of people etc.

Culture, together with exercising a powerful influence on the market, is also determinant in art. Hughes explains this point efficaciously in the *Mona Lisa Curse*, where he claims that "The art world beautifully copies our money driven, celebrity obsessed, entertainment culture; same fixation on fame, same obedience to mass media that jostles for our attention with its noise and wow and flutter."

The Cultural Diamond of this contemporary phenomenon views culture on the pedestal and it is mainly focused on the consumption side, as the production part in itself has consumption as its priority.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented the *Salvator Mundi* as a post factum branded artwork, analyzing both the intrinsic value of the painting, his history and the status it acquired by means of society. Regarding the first point, it is important to keep in mind the greatness and versatility of its author, together with his constant strive to perfection, which made him a great example of the male artistic genius. In addition, the painting itself has an appealing duplicity, the humane appearance of Jesus attracts the spectator, that is, however, pushed away by the mystery it emanates. In relation to its history, the painting has undergone copious vicissitudes, it has been repainted, ruined and eventually lost, twice, which confers to the painting further air of mystery. The most problematic point is, then, the role the painting has been given by society. Hopefully, this essay has shown how the *Salvator Mundi* has nearly lost its intrinsic value and, thanks to the characteristics just listed, it has appealed to the masses, becoming an icon of mass consumption. More specifically, a Da Vinci has become a branded icon, a guarantee of value, but also a commodified object, which is seen only in relation to its market value. To explain how it is possible to retroactively turn something that was not born with the intention of being branded and commodified into such a status, the paper adopts Hughes' critique of the postmodern dignity of art. Once laid out the theoretical basis, the paper discussed the practical marketing techniques adopted by Christie's to confer to the painting the estate of a contemporary icon, as, for instance, the placing of the Renaissance painting next to the *Sixty Last Suppers* by Andy Warhol. Finally, the importance of the cultural influence is supported by the theory of markets as 'cultural constellations' (Velthuis, 2005) and by Hughes' consideration on the artworld being the mirror of society (and its current obsession with entertainment culture).

This discussion, to fill the gap in current research, addresses the motives that led this painting to be assimilated to contemporary artworks. I believe that this realization raises a number of important issues, mainly whether this post factum change in status actuated by society is ethical or even necessary, and also whether this shift in meaning is gonna happen more and more in the future with the spread of social media or even if the same phenomenon has always existed in different terms in the past. As a last remark, it would be interesting in future researches to fully consider the importance that mystery plays in this transition.

Quote

I asked the quote to Valeria Merlini, a Roman restorer who curated the exhibition Leonardo a Milano "San Giovanni Battista" and worked on the restoration of many important Italian paintings (more information can be found here: <https://www.msrestauri.com/portfolio/>). In particular, I asked her a personal view on the aspects she finds intriguing about Leonardo and the Salvator Mundi, both as a person and as a connoisseur of the artist. She is busy these days but she promised to get back at me before the presentation.

queste cose non vanno criticate, sono necessarie all'interno della società. queste cose vengono mosse da progressioni e regressioni culturali, oggetto semplice da sintetizzare dalla mente umana (gesti semplici). Valore del mercato: tanto è più raro tanto più valore acquisisce. Forse Da Vinci è reso famoso da Dan Brown. Circa 236.000.000 risultati (0,70 secondi). Leonardo personaggio interessante, non identificabile con un ruolo, è tante cose messe insieme, è personaggio letterario. E' uomo di corte, facevano molto. Il modo in cui viene presentato con un attributo gli conferisce una storia da dire. Leonardo era un grande pasticcione dal punto di vista tecnico. Il muro era sbagliato, non ha aspettato abbastanza. Tentativi di fare cose nuove, esasperati, a volte incasina. Unica cosa sicuramente importante è procedere per velature toglie il contorno, sfumato, hanno una presenza diversa. Principio brandiano: un'opera esiste quando viene riconosciuta come tale, momento teorico non si sa se è arte. Il suo valore dipende dall'interesse che c'è. Il mistero di Dan Brown continua nella storia del quadro. Va sottoposto ad analisi da una commissione internazionale transparent. Cronologia del legno, carbonio 14, esistono anche copie autorizzate. Velature ultime cose che si fanno, quindi è strano scoprirlo mentre restauri. La Modestini ci è andata fuori di testa nella cosa. E' esposto dall'idea che venga esposto, quindi lo tiene nel mito.

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Twitter post by the Louvre Abu Dhabi:

<https://twitter.com/dctabudhabi/status/1036481469647073280>

Youtube video of Christie's auction: <https://youtu.be/3orkmMISpmI>

Youtube video of Christie's promotional of the auction of the painting:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-lfBwS7ivs>

Page with funny edits of the painting:

<https://www.tribune.com/arti-visive/2017/11/la-vendita-record-del-salvator-mundi-di-leonardo-scattena-il-web-ecco-le-immagini-piu-divertenti/>